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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the motion picture industry policies affecting audiences must be developed in terms of behavioral implications, this paper reviews the literature related to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) film rating system to ascertain the degree to which the system has met its purposes. The first section of the paper offers a brief history of the development and purpose of the film rating system, while the second section presents a synopsis of two social psychological theories of human motivation--reactance theory and commodity theory--and discusses their relevance to the rating system. The third section provides a review of studies that have examined the credibility of the MPAA's assertion that it is providing information to the public, especially parents, and the methodology used by the MPAA to develop its rating system. The final section of the paper draws conclusions, based on the research reviewed, as to the rating system's effectiveness and appropriateness as a policy document. (FL)

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# G-PG-R-X: AN EVALUATION OF THE PURPOSE, PROMISE, AND PERFORMANCE OF THE MOVIE RATING SYSTEM

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# G-PG-R-X: AN EVALUATION OF THE PURPOSE, PROMISE, AND PERFORMANCE OF THE MOVIE RATING SYSTEM

## I: Introduction

In the present paper it is argued that policy decisions and policymaking, in any of the mass media of communications but with a focus here on film, that affect or are directed at people must be developed with an eye toward their behavioral implications and consequences. Further, these behavioral outcomes must be periodically assessed to allow policymakers and others to gain an understanding of and insight to the full range of effects (both intentional and unintentional) such policies have. While philosophical considerations are often the spark that ignites policymakers to action, in the final analysis, the efficacy and utility of such policies and their means for implementation must be judged in light of their behavioral outcomes. Moreover, although it may not always be possible for behavioral research to directly test the utility of a policy, such research does lend itself to and can offer an indirect test of a policy by analyzing the means for implementing it. Clearly, the results of systematic behavioral research can serve as a meaningful and useful criterion by which to judge both the policy's effectiveness and whether or not it is accomplishing that which it sets out to accomplish.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to review the scientific literature related to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) film rating system to ascertain the degree to which this self-regulatory policy has met its purpose and goal. Although the analysis to follow focuses specifically on a U.S.-based policy, this analysis has international implications as well since many foreign nations (e.g., Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand) also have film classification policies quite similar in structure and method of implementation to the U.S.. movie industry's. The present paper will review and discuss those social science studies which have addressed themselves to the MPAA's film rating system and in which data have been gathered by empirical methods. In this paper the following elements are presented: a brief history of the development and purpose of the present MPAA film rating system, a synopsis of two closely related social psychological theories of human motivation and their relevance to the rating system, and a review of the scientific studies that have examined the ratings. The final section of this paper will offer conclusions, based on information described in earlier sections, as to the rating system's usefulness and appropriateness as a policy document.

## II: Origin and Purpose of the Movie Rating System

Generally speaking, mass communications policymaking is in

response to or in anticipation of a particular effect that a particular medium or, especially, its content, has or might have on either the public at large or some significant aggregate within that public.[1] Hence, for example, we have federal policy governing the use of the electromagnetic spectrum as administered by the Federal Communications Commission.[2] Unlike the electromagnetic spectrum, which was designated as a public resource,[3] the motion picture medium has always operated as a private enterprise and hence was not immediately amenable to the same rationale used to justify governmental regulation of broadcasting.[4] Historically this was to be both a blessing and a curse: movies were ostensibly blessed with regulatory noninterference by governmental agencies[5] while simultaneously cursed in that their First Amendment rights went unprotected thereby leaving the door open for the abridgement of freedom from prior restraint[6] and censorship granted to other mass media such as the press.[7] In fact, virtually since its inception, the medium of motion pictures has borne the burden of local, state, and federal attempts at censorship and control.[8] A myriad of pressure groups, too, representing an equally diverse number of philosophical, moral, social, and religious points of view have also attempted to exert their influence on, especially, motion picture content, as well as film production and exhibition.[9] Examples of such attempts at film regulation may be traced back to as early as 1894, a short two weeks

following Thomas Edison's initial presentation of his kinetoscope. Dolorita in the Passion Dance, an extraordinarily popular "peep show" motion picture on the Atlantic City (New Jersey) Boardwalk, was condemned, and subsequently removed from exhibition, for its daring display of the uncovered ankles of the picture's "star," the Spanish dancer Carmencita.[10] The history of attempts at regulation and self-regulation of the motion picture medium has been recounted in numerous sources and, hence, for the purposes of this paper, need not be discussed here.[11] The intent and method of implementation of the present movie rating system are, however, germane and will be briefly reviewed in this section.

According to Jack Valenti, President of the MPAA, the present rating system came about as a result of two factors: "an avalanching revision of American mores and customs" and two 1968 Supreme Court decisions to uphold "the constitutional power of states and cities to prevent the exposure of children to books and films which could not be denied to adults."[12]

The present rating system was initiated on November 1, 1968. With but minor modifications, it has remained in effect unchanged for more than 12 years.[13] In his testimony before the House Subcommittee on Special Small Business Problems in 1978, Valenti asserted that "the best measure of a system is how long it has existed and how well it has served."[14] Clearly, Valenti's criterion of system longevity is a woefully inadequate means

for measuring a system's value and effectiveness: simply because a policy has managed to remain in effect over a period of time may be more indicative of inertia on the part of policymakers than the policy's utility.

At the time of its adoption, the rating system represented a radical shift in industry philosophy with regard to self-regulation. In earlier years the Production Code Administration (PCA) granted a seal of approval based on a film's content. The extant arrangement views as its purpose providing

> advance information to enable parents to make judgments on the movies they want their children to see or not to see. Basic to the program was and is the responsibility of the parent to make the decision. . . . The only objective of the ratings is to advise the parent in advance so he may determine the suitability or unsuitability of viewing by his children. [emphasis in original][15]

Thus, according to the MPAA, no judgment is made as to approval or disapproval of films, as was the case when the PCA provided self-regulation.[16]

The reasoning, or philosophy, implied in creating a movie classification system was, essentially, that not all films are appropriate for viewing by all persons. Presumably, an underlying reason for this audience suitability assertion is the presumption of deleterious consequences which may occur

as a result of certain age-aggregate's viewing certain kinds of films. Thus, the social purpose of the rating system was to "provide advance information" concerning the content of movies with the goal of protecting certain age-groups from exposure to these certain kinds of films. The method for implementing measures to meet this goal was to establish age-group attendance restrictions by classifying films, according to their content, into age-specific attendance categories.

Films are submitted to the MPAA voluntarily by their producer. Based on four criteria (theme, language, nudity and sex, and violence) a seven-person rating board -- the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) -- assigns a rating by majority vote. Producers of a given picture may appeal a rating and/or re-edit their film in order to qualify for a different rating.[17] Sometimes another approach is taken:

> Although it is not talked about, it's well known in the trade that CARA will often view a picture and give filmmakers an idea of "areas of concern" before handing down a particular rating. The filmmaker can then voluntarily make the appropriate cuts instead of appealing an "R" or an "X." The cutting process has been known to go back and forth many times between the board and filmmaker before an official rating is handed down.[18]

The MPAA classifies a film submitted to it into one of four categories: G for general audiences, all ages admitted; PG for parental guidance suggested, some material may not be suitable for children (this symbol was originally M and then GP before becoming PG); R for restricted, under 17-year-olds (originally 16) require accompanying parent or adult guardian; X for no one under 17 years of age (originally 16) admitted.[19]

Thus, if one is to believe the MPAA, the movie rating system is an altruistically motivated, protective, and essentially harmless device advanced for the public's benefit by a benevolent industry organization with the goal of protecting under 17-year-olds from exposure to certain kinds of material by restricting their attendance to films containing such material. However, as will be argued below, two social psychological theories of human motivation posit that by establishing restrictions for a commodity (e.g., motion pictures), policymakers and their policies may inadvertantly foster a desire for that which they want to restrict among the aggregate whom they wish to protect. Therefore, if such "boomerang" effects can be shown to occur, the value, usefulness, and appropriateness of social policies founded on such premises, including the MPAA's, may be called into question. In other words, if it can be shown that the method (film classification by age group) for achieving the goal (protection from exposure) is inadequate, then this implies that policymakers must return

to "the drawing board" to rethink both the policy and, perhaps more importantly, the means for implementing the policy. Conversely, if such "boomerang" effects are not found, this would lend support to the policy and its method of implementation.

## III: Social Science Theory and the MPAA's Method for Implementing its Policy

The four movie rating symbols were designed to act as warnings concerning various aspects of film content. According to two psychological theories, such warnings and/or their classificatory implications lead to an increase in the attractiveness of films carrying such warnings. Outlined below are the major elements of reactance and commodity theory.

As conceptualized by its originator, Brehm, reactance theory is concerned with the numerous freedoms involved in daily experience and the manner of response an individual elects when a freedom is threatened or eliminated.[20] Brehm states that

> . . . reactance is defined <u>not</u> simply as an unpleasant tension which the individual will reduce in any way that he can, such as reducing the importance of any freedom which he happens to lose, but rather as a motivational state with a specific direction, namely, the recovery of freedom. [emphasis in original][21]

Thus, reactance theory predicts that when a behavioral freedom

is restricted or eliminated the individual is motivationally aroused to restore the threatened freedom. One method of freedom restoration is by actual attempts to engage in the endangered freedom.[22] R and X ratings specifically restrict attendance among under 17-year-olds. According to reactance theory, then, we should expect to find increased desire as well as actual attempts to attend R- and X-rated movies among these individuals. Moreover, it can be argued that while R and X ratings do not "officially" prohibit attendance among persons 17 years and above, their restrictive implications and film content connotations may act as a source of reactance arousal for these individuals too. Indeed, a 1947 study reported that among respondents (adults) who felt that movie censorship in general was "too strict," 58% indicated they were more likely to see movies that had "trouble with the censors" while only 15% indicated they were less likely to see such films.[23] While caution must be applied to such ex post facto explanations, the intuitive appeal and face validity of such an interpretation as applied here cannot be ignored.

Brock states that commodity theory "promotes a psychological conceptualization of traditionally economic variables such as supply, demand, and utility."[24] In brief, commodity theory predicts that individuals attach greater value to objects in a class that are in scarce supply than they do objects in more

abundant supply. And, as Herman and Leyens state, "increased value can be manifested in greater attraction."[25] MPAA ratings act as a method of product classification or categorization, thereby perhaps identifying for the individual the profusion or scarcity of a commodity. Therefore, according to commodity theory, those movies with ratings that are less prevalent should be most attractive. Presently most movies are rated either PG or R. Between November 1979 and October 1980 only 4% and 10% of all films submitted for rating were G- and X-rated respectively.[26] Hence, the attractiveness of these films should be greater than for the more abundant PG and R films. Additionally, commodity theory, like reactance theory, postulates that by restricting a commodity its availability (in terms of accessibility) is necessarily limited and the consequence of such restrictions is increased desire for the restricted material.[27] Taken from this perspective, commodity theory's prediction would be identical to reactance theory's (although for different reasons): R- and X-rated films should be more attractive than G- or PG-rated movies.

Empirical support for both of these theories has been widely reported under a variety of conditions and hence will not be detailed here.[28] Instead, one especially germane application of these two theoretical approaches will be offered. Herman and Leyens[29] examined the audience for Belgian television (the RTB) movies. The RTB broadcasts advisory warnings (qualifications)

about some of the movies it programs. Three thematic circumstances are covered by the advisories: violence, sex, and other (depressing or tense climate). Additionally, there are three levels of advisories ranging from the implicit to the explicit. For each film the warnings are broadcast three times. Herman and Leyens recorded the viewing habits of a sample audience for RTB films broadcast over a four-year period and found that "qualifications make the movies more desirable for the television viewers. As a result, the movies with advisories are watched more than the movies without them."[30]

In summary, reactance theory would predict greater attraction (and hence attendance) to R- and X-rated movies than G- or PG-rated films because of the freedom restrictions carried by the R and X rating; commodity theory would predict greater attraction to G- and X-rated movies due to their limited availability relative to PG- and R-rated films, or, alternately, greater attraction to R- and X-rated movies than G- or PG-rated films because of the commodity restrictions. What both of these theories suggest, then, is that the MPAA film rating system is faced with a paradoxical dilemma insofar as its classification scheme may produce an effect exactly opposite to that which it was designed to achieve.[31] The next section details the results of studies designed to test the hypotheses derived from these two theories as applied to the movie rating system.

## IV: Research and the Rating System

As was presented earlier, the social purpose of the MPAA film rating system is to offer information concerning the content of movies; the goal of the ratings is to protect under 17-year-olds from exposure to certain kinds of film content; the method for achieving this goal is attendance restrictions. Presented below is a summary of research relevant to (1) the credibility of the MPAA's assertion that it is providing information to the public and, especially, the parents of under 17-year-olds and (2) the methodology used by the MPAA to implement its film rating system.

Awareness, Information Value, and Use of the Ratings: The public's awareness of the rating system, the information value of the ratings, and parental use of the ratings as a guide for their children's movie attendance are all concepts directly related to the extent to which the MPAA's policy is achieving its purpose. Awareness of the system is a necessary (but by itself insufficient) antecedent condition which must be satisfied prior to actual use of the system. The informational value of the ratings to parents is a more precise measure of the policy's fulfillment of its purpose. Actual parental use of the ratings as a guide to their children's movie-going behavior is the prgamatic criterion by which one may judge the MPAA's attainment of its purpose. Taken concurrently, the research results on these three concepts offer the means by which an evaluation regarding the extent to which

the policy has realized its purpose may be offered.

In studies commissioned by the MPAA, the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) has found that public awareness of the rating system has virtually reached the saturation point.[32] The pervasiveness of simple awareness of the system's existence has also been confirmed by independent research. The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography noted in 1970 that the rating system "appears to be well known to the public, especially to that part of the public most frequently attending the movies."[33] Robertus and Simon found that 65% of the parents and 70% of the teenagers they surveyed in 1970 "could provide an adequate answer" to a question which asked if they had heard about the rating system and what its purpose was.[34] Most recently, Austin reported that fully 98% of his sample of high school students indicated that they were familiar with the film rating system; these data were collected in May, 1980.[35] Thus, the literature indicates a high level of awareness among the public regarding the simple existence of the rating system. However, this finding is, at best, a weak indicator of the system's informational value. Clearly, one can be "aware" of any given phenomenon's existence and still not <u>understand</u> the phenomenon's meaning.

Richard D. Heffner, Chairman of CARA, has asserted, "Our main objective is to provide an early-warning signal to parents, who may then exercise their own responsiblity to expose their

youngsters to more mature film content only as they individually mature."[36] Likewise, MPAA President Valenti told the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography: "We give information to parents and we say, 'Mr. and Mrs. Parent, you make the judgment for your children.'"[37] From a policy and policymaking perspective, how much information, if any, what kind of information, if any, and of what use such information is (as well as the usefulness to whom), if any, are reasonable questions that can be posed. Answers to such questions, however, are difficult to come by. Comments contrary to the MPAA's claim of providing information have been long and loudly voiced. Film exhibitors have been particularly critical concerning the cloudiness of meaning of the PG and R symbols. Mac A. Child, an Arizona exhibitor wrote: "Everyone knows what an 'X' film is and what a 'G' film is -- but the misunderstanding between 'PG' and 'R' is incredible."[38] A Kansas exhibitor, Con R. Spainhour, states: "In the selection process for films for our screen I find the current rating system wholly inadequate. G, I understand, that's simple. X, likewise, and R are clear. But, that vast wonderland called PG is beyond my comprehension."[39] In Rochester, New York, William Yantz of Jo-Mor Enterprises theaters maintains that "There naturally have to be guidelines. But there still is a lot of confusion, especially about the 'PG' rating."[40] Likewise, filmmakers, too, have stated their complaints on this matter: for example, producer Don Devlin said, "We're confused about what makes a movie an R or a PG."[41]

Sources outside of the movie industry have been equally critical of the informational haziness of the rating symbols. Consumers' Research magazine reports that "The industry's PG rating has proved quite unsatisfactory to careful parents since films so designated have often been a cause of embarrassment."[42] And CARA Chairman Heffner has had to warn that "PG does not mean 'pretty good'"[43] (or, as some wags have noted, "pretty gamey"). In 1971 Time reported that "there has been increasingly vehement criticism that the categories G-GP-R-X are just so much alphabet soup."[44] New York Times critic Vincent Canby wrote that the rating system "seems primarily to disseminate initials, not information."[45] Finally, as late as October 1980, a full 12 years after the rating system's adoption, Heffner admitted that he felt that parents did not "universally understand these definitions of G, PG, R, and X . . . But I think we're getting there."[46]

The ORC has also investigated, again in studies commissioned by the MPAA, the usefulness of the system to parents as a guide for deciding what movies children should see. The most recent survey conducted by ORC and reported in October 1980, found that among adults with children under 18 years of age, 61% reported that the system was "very useful" or "fairly useful" (down from 65% in 1979); among adults with children under 13 years, 62% said the system was very or fairly useful (down from 66% in 1979).[47] Important to note is that ORC's

one question asks respondents how useful they perceived the ratings to be, but not the respondents actual use of the ratings themselves. Thus, the validity of ORC's results as a means by which to judge parents' utilization of the ratings is, at best, questionable; the phrasing of ORC's question provides data only on parental perceptions but not parental behavior.

Independent research on the informational value and, especially, the usefulness of the rating system, though scarce, has tended not to agree with the results reported by the MPAA commissioned polls. In the earliest study, Robertus and Simon found that teenagers were more likely than were parents to report using the system in making film selection decisions: 54% of the teenagers reported the rating influenced their choice of film, 41% of the teenagers reported that their parents were influenced by the rating in their (the teenagers) film choice, and 50% of the parents reported that the rating was used by them to influence their teenagers' film choice.[48] A Los Angeles Times study of Southern California movie-goers reported that, in 1972, their respondents indicated that the MPAA ratings affected their decision as to whether or not to see a film in the following ways: 27% of the adults and 1% of the teenagers in the sample said that the rating indicated the movie's suitability for children; 7% of both adults and teens reported that the rating "tells what to expect" in the movie.[49] Yeager's 1972 study indicated that parents expressed a cynical attitude

toward the rating system, had a skeptical reaction to the ratings, and that they used the ratings "solely as a reinforcement for opinions that they have derived from reading reviews or from talking with friends."[50] One year later, Bluem found that among high school and college students 73% considered the film ratings "useful and valuable" and 65% felt that the MPAA film classification system was a "sensible guideline to moral content."[51] Respress found that among high school students there was "considerable confusion over what the code really is"; 84% reported their parents had "little or no say" regarding their film attendance and 58% stated they did not use the ratings in their movie selection process.[52] Finally, O'Dell reported that her study showed that "The MPAA rating system was not found to be held in high esteem by parents" and that parents felt "the MPAA rating system cannot be relied upon to prevent children from seeing unsuitable material in films!"[53]

In summary, the following conclusions may be drawn concerning (1) the public's awareness of the rating system, (2) the informational value of the ratings, and (3) the usefulness of the ratings. Both independent research and research commissioned by the MPAA have found that nearly the entire public is aware of the rating system's existence. On this point there is no disagreement. Hence it can be concluded that cognizance of the system has reached virtual saturation. However, it must be noted that the constructs "awareness," "information value," and "usefulness," while necessarily interrelated and inter-

dependent, are not synonymous.

How much and what kind of information is provided by the four symbols has not been subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny. What evidence does exist is based largely on anecdotal reports. While preliminary research has begun on the meaning people assign to the four symbols,[54] a conservative conclusion is that, for the present, since no reliable and valid assessment has been made, no judgment can be offered about the quantity and kind of information provided by the rating system. However, we can also conclude that based upon what is presented in advertising, the rating symbols themselves offer little information. For example, the R symbol will be displayed along with, in many but not all instances, the notation that the film is restricted to under 17-year-olds unless accompanied by an adult; no information pertaining to why the film is R-rated is offered (i.e., which of the four criteria used by CARA is the cause for the R rating).

The kind and quantity of information provided by the ratings is necessarily related to the utility of the rating system to parents. If only nebulous information, regardless of quantity, is being offered we cannot expect to find the rating system useful to parents as a means for judging the suitability of films for their children. Likewise, if little or no information is offered, the utility of the ratings to parents should be insignificant. Research conducted at the

request of the MPAA finds that the rating system has been judged "very" or "fairly useful" as a guide for deciding their children's film attendance behavior by about two-thirds of the parents surveyed. Contrarily, independent research (though, it should be noted, somewhat dated) concludes that: parents had unfavorable reactions to the rating system, only half the parents actually used the ratings as a guide to their children's movie attendance, and teenagers reported that, for the most part, their parents rarely exerted an influence on their movie attendance. The MPAA's conclusions concerning the utility of the ratings is based upon responses to a single question that inquires as to perceived but not actual utility. In contrast, independent research has used multiple means for ascertaining the usefulness of the ratings. Moreover, the apparent (but still to be substantiated claim of a) lack of information value conveyed by the rating symbols makes it impossible for parents to use the ratings as a suitability-for-viewing guide. Thus, the third conclusion to be drawn in this section is that, at least as late as 1973 (and perhaps persisting to the present), parents held an unfavorable opinion of the rating system's usefulness as a guide to their children's movie attendance; Yeager and O'Dell's research, especially, supports this conclusion.[55] A final note should be made concerning the methodology used in the studies reported above. The reliability and validity of all of these studies is

questionable. All of these reports rely on self-report measures, which are highly susceptible to distortion by the respondent, and none have attempted to measure actual behavior either in a controlled experimental setting or in a natural environment. With the above caveat in mind, it is concluded here that the answer to the question, "Has the MPAA's self-regulatory policy achieved its purpose?" is negative.

Movie Ratings and Movie Attendance: Let us now turn to a review of studies which examine the question of the appropriateness of the MPAA's method for achieving its goal: film classification. Both reactance theory and commodity theory predict differential attendance at films carrying various rating symbols due to motivational factors evoked by the ratings; such differences are founded on the basis of threat (R rating) or elimination (X rating) of a behavioral freedom in the case of reactance theory and, in the case of commodity theory, on availability of a product (scarcity of G and X films) or availability relative to market restrictions (R and X films). Differential attendance caused by ratings therefore addresses both the goal achievement and appropriateness of implementation of the policy. If the evidence shows that such predictions occur among under 17-year-olds, then it can be concluded that the classification by age-aggregate method is inappropriate and, in fact, counterproductive.

Even before the rating system began operation in 1968,

and continuing to the present, numerous observers have ruminated about the influence of the ratings on movie attendance -- on people of all ages, not just under 17-year-olds.[56] Nevertheless, despite the frequently voiced "cookie jar syndrome" espoused by some writers, the MPAA has always maintained that there exists no relationship whatsoever between a film's rating and its box office return[57] (implied in this argument is the "no effects on attendance behavior" perspective). However, as one report has noted, "there have been no researched studies on the relationship between the various MPAA ratings and box office receipts."[58] Jack Valenti has gone so far as to advance "Valenti's Law of Ratings: If you have a movie that a lot of people want to see, no rating will hurt it. If you have a movie that few people want to see, no rating will help it."[59] Conversely, Fuchs and Lyle state that film ratings, especially those which prohibit attendance for certain age groups (R and X), "probably enhance a film's attractiveness."[60]

Untested comments about and isolated examples of the audience appeal of various ratings have, for the most part, been focused on the G and X categories and may be summarized as follows.[61] The extreme categories, though polar opposites in one sense, create, in another sense, congruent connotations in the public. A G rating may convey an innocuous image of juvenile innocence and childish (or child-oriented) film content. To adult movie-goers this image is probably unattractive and

hence their likelihood of attending films so rated is lessened.[62] In contrast, an X rating might imply that the picture contains offensive content explicitly portrayed; with few exceptions (Emmanuelle or Last Tango in Paris for instance) such content is not socially sanctioned and thus attendance (regardless of interest perhaps) to such fare is inhibited.[63] Hence, while the public perception of the "meaning" of these two ratings may differ in terms of content, they may agree in terms of behavioral outcome: G and X ratings may be "box office poison," the popular rhetoric says.

For producers, distributors, exhibitors, and audiences alike, the middle ground occupied by PG- and R-rated films may be the most comfortable. Although empirically untested, films in these two categories might be interpreted by these four groups as mature in both content and audience orientation. For films so rated, their attractiveness to audiences, therefore, should be greater than for films rated G or X.

In sum, popular perception of the MPAA's ratings may be described as: G, childish or infantile; PG, adolescent; R, adult; and X, deviant. It is important to reiterate that, to date, these dimensions have not been empirically validated.

One approximate measure of differential attendance at films by MPAA rating is the film rental revenues earned by rating symbol. The inexactness of such a measure is caused by at least three factors. First, rental revenue is not

equivalent to number of admissions (i.e., people attending a particular film). Second, film rental data are often inaccurate, incomplete, unreported, or not accessible to independent researchers. Third, even if the drawbacks noted in the first two factors could be controlled for, rental revenue does not lend itself to an age-group breakdown (i.e., the percent of such revenues generated by under 17-year-olds). Nonetheless, examination of such financial data has heuristic utility insofar as it can illustrate the distribution -- and perhaps a pattern -- of public attraction to films by rating symbol. Three published studies have examined this aspect of movie ratings and will be summarized here.

Davidson used Variety's "All-Time Film Rental Champs" list to analyze revenues by ratings from 1970 through 1976 inclusive.[64] Variety's criterion for inclusion on this list is that a film must earn $4 million in domestic (U.S. and Canada) rentals. Davidson found (n = 252 films) that: the PG rating accounted for 48% of all films listed by Variety and 49% of the rentals, R accounted for 30% of the films listed, and 34% of the rentals, G accounted for 19% of the films listed and 16% of the rentals, and X accounted for 3% of the films in the list and 2% of the rentals.[65] He concludes that:

> In terms of making what Variety considers "big rentals," the chances are 1.6 to 1 that a PG picture will make it on the list as opposed to

> an R. R's on the other hand tend to make more money. . . . a film with a PG has a better chance of making "big bucks." However, if an R makes it to this particular list, the chances are that it will do better at the box office.[66] [emphasis added]

Austin's 1980 report, using a similar methodological approach, covered the 1969-1977 time span inclusive (n = 350 films).[67] In this study he found that PG-rated films accounted for 46% of all top-grossing films (again, Variety's "All-Time Film Rental Champs" list was used) and 57% of the rentals, R accounted for 31% of the films listed and 32% of the rentals, G accounted for 19% of the films listed and 7% of the rentals, and X-rated films accounted for 4% of the films on the list and 4% of the rentals.[68] Austin also compared the number of films by rating between all films rated by CARA and those listed by Variety as "All-Time Film Rental Champs." The study reported that significantly ($p < .01$) more PGs and fewer Rs appeared in Variety's list than were rated by CARA.[69]

What both the Davidson and Austin studies suggest is that the percent of films by each rating symbol on Variety's list was a relatively good predictor of the percent of revenue they would each account for among high-grossing films. However, a criticism applicable to both of these studies is that the film rentals were not adjusted for inflation. This factor was

controlled for in a third study which examined the success ratios for each of the four symbols over an eleven year period, 1969-1979 inclusive. Austin, Nicolich, and Simonet[70] analyzed the frequencies with which the various ratings were assigned to feature-length films and the frequencies with which feature films in each category were "successful." Minimal "success" was defined as revenues of at least $1 million (1969 dollars) in U.S.-Canada rentals, as reported by Variety (n = 962).[71] The procedure for adjusting the revenues to constant 1969 dollars raised the level required for "success" each year until it became nearly $1.7 million in the last year studied (1979).[72] Austin et al. found that PG enjoyed the highest average success ratio (26.7%) of the four categories over 11 years; G films had the second highest average success ratio (24.2%), followed by R (13.7%) and X (5.0%). Over the 11 years, the unrestricted categories (G and PG) combined were found to have accounted for 69.1% of the successful films, while the restricted categories (R and X) combined accounted for 30.9%.

In summary, the results of these three studies which used film rental data as a means to infer differential attendance patterns by rating all converge to suggest the popularity of the PG symbol. Moreover, all three studies found that the two unrestricted categories accounted for two-thirds of the "successful" films; the remaining one-third was, by and large,

accounted for by R-rated films. Thus, these reports would appear to fail to support reactance theory's predictions and offer inconclusive -- or only partial -- support for commodity theory under the scarcity-abundance condition. As was noted above, however, film rental revenues are an inexact means for ascertaining the population's attendance by rating symbol in general -- and, more specifically, for particular age groups this information cannot be ascertained at all except by only the most approximate methods (e.g., division of rentals by percent of average weekly admissions for particular age aggregates). The final portion of this section summarizes the results of those studies that have used human subjects to examine the ratings' influence on movie attendance.

The Los Angeles Times' 1972 report found that 60% of the teenagers (n = 491) in its sample said they checked to see what rating a movie has before deciding whether or not to attend.[73] When asked "How does the rating of a movie effect your decision of whether or not to see it?" the teenagers (n = 295) responded in the following way: 8% would not see an R-rated movie, 1% did not want to see G films, 6% preferred G or PG movies, and 6% preferred R or X films.[74] Respress's 1973 study reported that more of the teenagers (n = 531) in his sample preferred R-rated films than films with the other symbols: 5% preferred G, 33% preferred PG, 47% preferred R, and 15% preferred X.[75] Further, Respress found that "teenagers

have little problem when it comes to seeing R rated films": 86% of his sample had seen R pictures and 53% had seen X-rated movies.[76]

The Times and Respress's research provide early documentation on teenagers' movie attendance behavior in relation to movie ratings. Both studies, however, rely entirely upon self-report responses to survey questionnaires. This methodology does not allow for an unambiguous ascertainment of movie ratings' effects on movie attendance behavior; an experimental design can produce such answers with greater internal validity.[77] Three studies conducted by Austin have used an experimental design, in addition to other self-report methods, to assess high school and college students' likelihood of attendance and actual attendance at films with the four ratings.[78] These reports, summarized below, offer not only the most recent data but also probably the most valid data due to the complexity of their research designs.

The experimental procedures followed for the three Austin studies of attendance at films by rating were identical. Subjects were asked to indicate their likelihood of attending each of four different (ficticious) films -- one with each of the four ratings -- on a Likert-like scale. Analysis of variance tests compared the subjects' mean likelihood of attendance score between each rating to determine whether or not the differences in means were statistically significant. In addition to the experimental treatment, other self-report

and unobtrusive measures (detailed below) were also employed to ascertain the respondents' movie rating preferences and actual attendance at movies by rating.

The results of the three experiments may be summarized as follows. In the earliest report (n = 64), a pilot study for the two following studies, a significant main effect for the movie rating variable was not found; i.e., there was no significant difference in likelihood of attendance between any of the four ratings among the high school students tested.[79] The two studies which followed the pilot, however, found a highly significant ($p < .001$) main effect for the rating variable. Among college students (n = 383) likelihood of attendance at both PG- and R-rated films was significantly greater than for both G- and X-rated movies. The rank order of mean values for likelihood of attendance by rating symbol, from most to least likely, was R-PG-X-G. Here, partial support for reactance theory (R rating preference) and commodity theory (under the restriction of a commodity condition) was found. No support for commodity theory under the abundance-scarcity condition was found.[80]

More important for analysis and evaluation of the appropriateness of the MPAA's method for implementing its policy are the results of the second experiment which involved high school students (n = 108).[81] As was found for college-age subjects, a significant ($p < .001$) main effect for the rating

variable was found. Among just those subjects under 17-years-old (n = 58), the age-aggregate of most concern for this paper's purposes, it was found that movies with a G, PG, and R rating were all significantly more likely to be attended than X-rated movies. Mean score differences for likelihood of attendance between G, PG, and R movies were nonsignificant ($p > .05$). The rank order of mean values for likelihood of attendance, from most to least likely, was R-PG-G-X. Thus, partial support for the commodity theory abundance-scarcity hypothesis was found (preference for G) and no support for either reactance or commodity theory's restriction hypotheses were found.

To summarize, two of the three experiments reported a significant main effect for the rating variable indicating that, other things equal, MPAA ratings do affect likelihood of attendance among college students and, more importantly, under 17-year-olds. From these findings, and interpreted as applied to the appropriateness of the MPAA's method for implementing its policy, it can be concluded that for under 17-year-olds, the age aggregate of particular concern, results of experiments show that R and X ratings did <u>not</u> foster an increased desire to attend pictures so rated over those rated G or PG. Thus the experimental data suggests that the rating system is not producing a boomerang effect among the age group to which it is directed.

In addition to the experimental design, two of Austin's

three studies[82] also used a self-report method to assess the respondents' general likelihood of attendance at pictures with the four ratings. Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were, generally, to attend films with each of the four ratings. A seven-point Likert-like scale was provided for their responses. Among college students (n = 170), G-, PG-, and R-rated movies were all significantly preferred to X-rated films; PG and R were both significantly preferred to G. Thus, for these respondents PG and R were the favored categories.[83]

In terms of the rating system's purpose and goal, under 17-year-olds are the individuals to whom the policy's method is directed; thus the difference between persons under and over 17 years is the crucial comparison. Among high school students, for their general likelihood of attendance, no significant age-group differences were found for the G and X symbols. Under 17s were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to attend PG-rated films than 17s and older; conversely, 17s and older were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to attend R-rated movies than under 17s.[84] Based on these data, then, it can be concluded that, as in the experimental condition, no boomerang effect was found; reactance and commodity theory's predictions were not supported. These findings, like those of the experiment, suggest that the MPAA policy's method for implementation is not inappropriate insofar as film classificaiton is not fostering a desire for that which the policy is attempting to protect under 17s from.[85]

The results of all of Austin's three studies reported thus far are open to criticism insofar as they all relied on self-reported behavior. Moreover, the results reported thus far measured respondents' likelihood of behavior as opposed to measuring actual behavior. Thus, while Austin's findings reported above suggest the appropriateness of the film classification methodology, these findings may be spurious in that likelihood of attendance rather than actual attendance was measured. Austin also collected data on actual movie attendance behavior by rating symbol using unobtrusive means. The results of this information provide us with insight to the respondents' rating symbol preference in terms of "real life" behavior. Moreover, since the measurement of this behavior was performed without the respondents' knowledge of the purposes for the measurement, the validity of the data may be greater than in the self-report conditions.

To be summarized here are the results of the unobtrusive measures conducted for just the two high school samples. In the first (pilot) study,[86] the respondents were asked to record the titles of films which they had attended during the previous six months. The respondents were not informed as to the purposes for gathering this information. Later Austin coded the titles by their MPAA rating to determine attendance percentages for each rating. Here it was found that 65% of all the titles listed were PG-rated, 29% were R-rated, and 6% were G-rated. Austin also computed the total number of times a given film title

(and its rating) was reported by the respondents (total number of "mentions" by title) and found that PG accounted for 52% of the total mentions, R accounted for 46%, and G accounted for 2%. (Age-group comparisons were not performed.) Thus, the second method of analysis, which may be interpreted as, in a sense, a "rating popularity index," suggests nearly equivalent percentages for PG and R; furthermore, these two symbols accounted for virtually all of the respondents' actual film attendance.

The second study conducted by Austin on high school students[87] used two unobtrusive measures of the respondents' actual attendance behavior vis-à-vis movie ratings. Respondents were asked to record the title of the last film they had attended. The respondents were also asked to indicate which of 121 film titles presented to them on a checklist they had attended. These checklist titles represented all films which had been exhibited locally over the previous three months. As was the case for the pilot study, the respondents were not informed of the purpose for gathering this information. The film titles were later coded by their MPAA rating to determine attendance percentages for each rating. Results of the analysis on the last movie attended by the respondents showed that PG- and R-rated films accounted for 91% of the film titles (44% and 47% repectively); respondents under 17 years reported that 37% and 54% of the films they most recently attended were PG- and R-rated respectively;

17-year-olds and older reported 38% PG and 50% R for their most recent attendance. Chi square analysis of MPAA rating frequencies between the two age groups showed no significant ($p > .05$) differences; that is, for their last movie attendance, under 17s did not differ significantly from 17s and older as to the film's rating (although, it can be noted, both age groups had attended more R- than PG-rated movies). In the checklist condition 13% G-, 37% PG-, and 43% R-rated films had been attended by under 17-year-olds; among 17s and older 11% G-, 30% PG-, and 40% R-rated films had been attended. As was the case for the last movie attended, the Chi square analysis of age group differences for MPAA rating frequencies was nonsignificant ($p > .05$).[88] Based on the unobtrusive measurements it may be concluded that under 17-year-olds most frequently attended films with either a PG or an R rating;[89] G- and X-rated movies were infrequently attended. Further, and in agreement with the experimental and other self-report findings discussed above, a boomerang effect was not found: films with restrictive ratings were not significantly more likely to have been attended by under 17s compared to respondents 17 and older.

The unobtrusive measurement of actual movie attendance among under 17-year-olds by rating symbol also offers a means to assess whether the rating system is accomplishing the goal of the MPAA's policy: protection from exposure to certain kinds of film content. Protection from exposure is contingent upon

enforcement of the age restrictions at the box office. If under 17-year-olds are admitted to R-rated films unaccompanied by an adult then it can be concluded that the policy's goal has not been reached.

The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography's Report made specific mention of "the weakest element in the rating procedure":[90] local enforcement of age restrictions for admission. While the National Association of Theatre Owners claims only 15% "slippage"[91] in age enforcement, other reports have indicated a much higher percentage of enforcement slippage. Elias' 1970 study found that more than three-fourths of those in his sample reported attending an "adults only" movie when they were underage.[92] More recently, in 1979, a television station used six children, ages 8 to 13, to test enforcement of age restrictions by theaters in Chicago. The underage children were admitted to R-rated movies three-fourths of the time.[93]

The results of the unobtrusive measurements in Austin's research, as detailed above, show that fully half the under 17s attended an R-rated movie the last time they went to the movies; in the checklist condition, 43% of the titles checked by under 17-year-olds were R-rated and 7% were X-rated. A cautionary note must be added to the interpretation of these data. The data reported by Austin did not indicate whether or not such admittance was gained "illegally" (e.g., due to laxness of enforcement of the age restriction) or "legally" (e.g., due to

the respondents' being accompanied by an adult). Based upon the research reported here a conservative conclusion is that the MPAA's goal of protection from exposure has been only marginally met. Enforcement of age restrictions appears to occur, at best, only half the time.

## V: Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to answer the following question: Has the MPAA's self-regulatory policy fulfilled its purpose, achieved its goal, and is the policy's method for implementation an appropriate one? Based on an exhaustive review of the empirical research literature, the following summary of findings is presented: (1) public awareness of the movie rating system has reached virtual saturation, (2) no valid and reliable assessment has been made regarding the quantity or kind of information provided by the rating symbols but based upon that which is presented in advertising the rating symbols themselves offer little information value, (3) parents have evaluated the ratings unfavorably in terms of their usefulness as a guide to their children's movie attendance, (4) analysis of financial data suggests differential patterns of attendance by rating, with the PG symbol being in terms of finance, and by inference attendance, the most successful, (5) two of three experiments found that, ceteris paribus, movie ratings caused significantly different likelihood of attendance responses;

among subjects under 17-years-old, however, the restrictive ratings did not evoke significantly greater likelihood of attendance responses than the nonrestrictive ratings, (6) in terms of general likelihood of movie attendance by rating it was also found that R and X ratings did not cause a boomerang effect among under 17-year-olds, (7) unobtrusive measurement of actual attendance found that under 17s most often attended films with either a PG or R rating but, again, no boomerang effect was observed.

This report's first major conclusion is in reference to the MPAA's stated purpose for its self-regulatory policy: to provide "advance information to enable parents to make judgments on the movies they want their children to see or not to see." At present, one key criticism may be leveled at the MPAA: as discussed above, it appears that the four rating symbols carry little informational value and the literature suggests that parents do not hold the ratings in high regard. Clearly, the MPAA cannot be faulted or held liable should parents fail to use the ratings as a guide for their childrens movie attendance <u>unless</u> the reason for their not using the ratings is due to the symbols' low informational value. Unfortunately, the research literature on the <u>relationship</u> between parental use of the ratings and the ratings' informational value is mute. Thus it is concluded that the present MPAA policy may not be meeting its purpose of providing advance information -- to, perhaps, anyone.

As has been noted, complaints about the information value of the ratings have been rife. In October 1980 Variety reported that the MPAA had informally agreed with the National Association of Theatre Owners to "launch an experiment in which PG ratings would be accompanied by explanatory information in newspaper ads, on recorded telephone messages, in newspaper time clocks and in press and tv [sic] reviews."[94] At the time the present paper was written, however, no further word on this proposal had been publicly issued. Thus at least two suggestions for future pursuit by policymakers and researchers can be offered with regard to the film rating system's informational value. First, explanatory movie ratings (all four symbols) should be constructed. Pretesting of such explanatory ratings should be conducted on large, representative samples to ensure their utility and informational value. Second, a longitudinal research project should begin immediately following the implementation of the explanatory rating system, to establish baseline data, and continuing on an annual basis. Care should be taken to ensure that the research studies address themselves to the informational value of the explanatory ratings, parental use of these ratings, and the relationship between the ratings and their use.

The second major conclusion of the present report is that the MPAA's method for implementing its policy (film classification) to meet its goal (protecting under 17s from exposure to certain kinds of filmic material) has "worked" and is appropriate insofar

as film classification has not produced a boomerang effect. The research literature indicates that film classification has not served to create or promote a desire for "forbidden fruit" (R- and X-rated films) among the age group it was designed to protect. Therefore, although two psychological theories have hypothesized an affirmative answer to the question "Does film classification using age attendance restrictions foster a desire for restricted films among those individuals the policy seeks to protect?," the research reviewed here suggests, instead, a negative answer.

It can be suggested that the X rating carries with it a substantial social stigma and that therefore under 17-year-olds "self-enforce"[95] the age restriction for this rating. In terms of the under 17s desire to attend R-rated movies the literature shows no significant difference between desire to attend R-, PG-, and G-rated movies; further, G, PG, and R films were all significantly preferred to X.

The findings of self-reported actual movie attendance behavior (using unobtrusive means) by under 17s suggests the predominance of the PG and R categories. This finding may be interpreted in terms of the "market availability" of films by rating. Presently most movies are rated either PG or R. Therefore, one may conclude that for movie ratings and their relationship to attendance, the menu equals the diet: that which is most commonly offered is that which is most commonly consumed.

The findings reported here may have international, as well as domestic, applicability. As was noted earlier, many countries have established film classification systems utilizing age restrictions. Since 1970, for instance, the British Board of Film Censors has issued certificates to films in one of four categories that are roughly equivalent to those established by the MPAA: "U," passed for general exhibition (i.e., audiences); "A," passed for general exhibition but parents are warned that a film so rated may have material not suitable for under 14-year-olds; "AA," passed as suitable for exhibition to persons 14 years and over; "X," no one under 18 years admitted.[96] Freiwillige Selbstcontrolle (Voluntary Self Control) in West Germany classifies films as suitable to all those over six years, those over 12, those over 16, and those over 18; all children under six years are prohibited from attending movies because "Authorities fear tots are too impressionable for large screen fare."[97] The external validity[98] to other nations of the research reviewed here can, of course, be questioned and thus the call for indigenous research in countires using age classifications for films is issued.

Still another area to which the present report may be applicable and relevant is television. During the past several years the American commercial networks have adopted a policy of broadcasting advisory warnings concerning the content of some of their programming: e.g., "The following program contains

material which may not be suitable for all family members and viewer discretion is advised." As has been the case for MPAA ratings (at least until recently), there has been no paucity of armchair philosophy as to such warnings' boomerang effect or their public relations value to the networks.[99] And, as was the case for MPAA ratings, little behavioral research has been conducted or reported on this subject.[100] We might suspect, though, that here the results of studies which have examined the impact of movie ratings on attendance are not precisely analogous to television advisories since there are substantial differences between the two media in terms of their content and viewing setting. Television is an at-home medium with, by and large, more "tame" content than motion pictures; parental supervision of viewing can be more easily accomplished in the television setting than in the motion picture setting.

The third, and final, conclusion of this report concerns the degree of attainment of the policy's goal. Although it has already been concluded here that the policy's method for implementation is an appropriate one, the relevant research has shown that on-site enforcement of the age restrictions imposed by the rating system has been, at best, remiss. Apparently, if an under 17-year-old wants to see an R-rated movie unaccompanied by an adult, s/he has at least a 50 percent chance of being admitted. Clearly, the MPAA's policy is meaningful and effective only to the extent that it is enforced. Thus, it is suggested that if the MPAA wishes to continue its self-

regulatory scheme, theater operators must be offered positive incentives to enforce the age restrictions at the box office. Moreover, these incentives must be of such a compelling (but probably not coercive) nature and magnitude so as to override the economic counterforce which may be the cause of the present laxness in enforcement. Two policy research questions are therefore in need of investigation: (1) Why isn't enforcement of the age restrictions occurring? What are the reasons offered by theater operators for this? (2) What incentives can be offered -- and by whom -- to encourage greater enforcement of age restrictions?

In short, it is concluded here that on one of three counts the MPAA's self-regulatory policy is judged as adequate. The methodology of attendance restrictions is appropriate: results of experiments, self-report, and actual attendance measurements showed that ratings, in and of themselves, have not fostered a desire for restricted films over nonrestrictive films among under 17-year-olds. On the two remaining counts, however, this report finds that the MPAA's policy is inadequate. First, this report does not endorse the conclusion that the MPAA's purpose for establishing its policy has been fulfilled. Suggested here was that implementation of more explanatory ratings, and research testing the explanatory value of these ratings to parents, be adopted as a means to accomplish the policy's purpose. Second, this report finds that achievement of the policy's goal has been only marginally met. In order to meet its goal a two-step

inquiry into the reasons why attendance restrictions are not being enforced and the incentives which can be offered so that these restrictions will, in the future, be enforced was suggested.

Finally, the present paper began by asserting that policy decisions and policymaking that affects or are directed at people must be developed and evaluated in terms of their behavioral implications. The present paper has provided an evaluation of one mass communications medium and the self-regulatory policy of that medium. Important to reiterate, also, is the statement that the study of behavioral outcomes vis-a-vis mass communications policy must be periodically assessed; for without such continual measurement and observation the policy may become outmoded and inappropriate simply by virtue of societal changes which occur.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ultimately, it can be argued, regardless of whether or not the policy is directed at a mass medium (e.g., ownership and control of point-to-point communications systems) or the mass medium's content (e.g., violence on television), the public is always affected.

[2]I.e., the Communications Act of 1934 with Amendments and Index Thereto.

[3]The rationale for this is traceable to the legal parameters governing public utilities in which broadcasters, like their utility brethern, were viewed as service organizations acting as fiduciaries for the public's resources.

[4]The doctrine of scarcity -- that the electromagnetic spectrum is finite -- was used to insist that broadcasters serve the public "interest, convenience and necessity."

[5]For a discussion of various attempts at governmental regulation see, for instance: G. Jowett, Film: The Democratic Art (1976) [hereinafter cited as Jowett]; R. Randall, Censorship of the Movies: The Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium (1968) [hereinafter cited as Randall]; J. Burroughs, X Plus 2: The MPAA Classification System During its First Two Years, 23 J. U. Film A. 44 (1971) [hereinafter cited as Burroughs].

[6]For a discussion of prior restraint see Jowett and Randall both supra note 5; R. Fisher, Film Censorship and Progressive Reform: The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922, 4 J. Popular Film 143 (1975); K. McCarthy, Nickel Vice and Virtue: Movie Censorship in Chicago, 1907-1915, 5 J.

Popular Film 37 (1976).

[7]See Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio, 236 U.S. 230 (1915), in which McKenna (at 24) wrote that "The exhibition of motion pictures is a business pure and simple . . . not to be regarded, nor intended to be regarded . . . as a part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion."

[8]See Jowett, Randall, and Burroughs, all supra note 5.

[9]See C. Metzger, Pressure Groups and the Motion Picture Industry, 254 Annals 110 (1947); for an excellent treatment of the Progressive reform movement vis-a-vis motion pictures see L. May, Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry 43 (1980) and Jowett, supra note 5, at 74.

[10]Jowett, supra note 5, at 109; Randall, supra note 5, at 11; T. Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture Medium Through 1925, at 256 (1926).

[11]See, e.g., Jowett and Randall, supra note 5; J. Vizzard, See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor (1970); M. Schumach, The Face on the Cutting Room Floor: The Story of Movie and Television Censorship (1964); R. Bottini, Self Regulation of Motion Picture Content (1966) (unpublished M.A. thesis in University of Missouri Library).

[12]J. Valenti, The Movie Rating System (no date, Motion Picture Association of America) at 1 [hereinafter cited as Valenti Movie Rating System] (on file with author). The two court cases Valenti refers to are Ginsberg v. New York, 390 U.S.

629 (1968) and Interstate Circuit v. Dallas, 390 U.S. 676 (1968). A third reason for the development and promulgation of the rating system, mentioned in passing by Valenti, was Hollywood's historic -- and in some sense well-founded -- fear of "intrusion of government into the movie arena" (Valenti Movie Rating System at 3). Richard D. Heffner, Chairman of the MPAA's Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) is a bit more forthright: "CARA was designed precisely to avoid such an [governmental] intrusion into free expression by the law" (R. Heffner, What G, PG, R, and X Really Mean, TV Guide, Oct. 4, 1980 at 42 [hereinafter cited as Heffner]). For additional comments on the rating system as a means to forestall externally imposed censorship see, for instance: M. Hodgson, Movie Ratings -- Do They Serve Hollywood or the Public?, N.Y. Times, May 24, 1981, sec. 2 (Arts and Leisure), at 1, col. 3; M. Mayer, The Rating System, Take One, March 1977, at 39; W. Warga, Major Film Exhibitor Won't Support New Rating System, Los Angeles Times, Nov. 11, 1968, part IV, at 1, col. 2. While this third reason is certainly important and worthy of analysis, especially in terms of the legal issues it suggests, it is, nonetheless, beyond the immediate scope and purpose of this paper.

[13]It should also be noted that publicly available, systematic, and controlled research assessing the rating system, and conducted by independent researchers, has not been conducted until very recently. The results of these studies are summarized in part IV of this paper.

[14]House Subcommittee on Special Small Business Problems, Movie Ratings and the Independent Producer, H.R. Rep. No. 996, 95th Cong., 2d Sess. 68 (1978) [hereinafter cited as Subcommittee].

[15]Valenti Movie Rating System, supra note 12, at 5.

[16]For discussion and analysis of self-regulation by the film industry see Randall, supra note 5; D. Ayer, R. Bates & P. Herman, Self-Censorship in the Movie Industry: An Historical Perspective on Law and Social Change, 1970 Wis. L. Rev. 791; Note, Private Censorship of the Movies, 22 Stan. L. Rev. 618 (1970). For a sociological analysis of self-regulation by the mass media see J. Best, The Social Control of Media Content, 14 J. Popular Culture 611 (1981).

[17]Valenti Movie Rating System, supra note 12, at 5.

[18]S. Ginsberg, "Endless Love" is Chopping its "X:" Fear Kidporn Tag, Variety, June 17, 1981, at 33, col. 5. See also P. Wood, "Dressed to Kill" -- How a Film Changes from "X" to "R", N.Y. Times, July 20, 1980, sec. 2 (Arts and Leisure), at 13, col. 1 [hereinafter cited as Wood]. Additional information on both the "official" and "unofficial" procedures followed by CARA in the assignment of ratings is provided in S. Farber, The Movie Rating Game 21 (1972).

[19]Valenti Movie Rating System, supra note 12, at 8.

[20]J. Brehm, A Theory of Psychological Reactance (1966) [hereinafter cited as Brehm].

[21]Brehm, supra note 20, at 11. In this passage Brehm is

clearly delineating reactance from dissonance theory (see L. Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance [1957]). While reactance theory appears to be a natural evolutionary step that takes as its starting point dissonance theory, there is an importance difference. Succinctly stated, the person experiencing dissonance responds to an internal cue as a consequence of his/her behavior; reactance theory is a person's response to an external cue over which s/he had no control.

[22]Brehm, supra note 20, at 9.

[23]L. Handel, Hollywood Looks at its Audience 128 (1950).

[24]T. Brock, Implications of Commodity Theory for Value Change, in Psychological Foundations of Attitudes 243 (A. Greenwald, T. Brock, & T. Ostrom eds., 1968) [hereinafter cited as Brock].

[25]G. Herman & J. Leyens, Rating Films on TV, 27 J. Com. 49 (1977) [hereinafter cited as Herman & Leyens].

[26]MPAA Film Ratings: 1968-1980, Variety, Nov. 5, 1980, at 48, col. 1.

[27]Brock, supra note 24, at 250.

[28]For summaries of research on reactance theory see J. Brehm, Responses to Loss of Freedom: A Theory of Psychological Reactance (1972) and M. Clee & R. Wicklund, Consumer Behavior and Psychological Reactance, 6 J. Consumer Research 389 (1980). For commodity theory research see: Brock, supra note 24; T. Brock, Erotic Materials: A Commodity Theory Analysis of Availability and Desirability, Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, vol. 1 at 131 (1970); H. Fromkin &

T. Brock, Erotic Materials: A Commodity Theory Analysis of the Enhanced Desirability that May Accompany Their Unavailability, 3 J. Applied Soc. Psych. 219 (1973); D. Hudson, The Effect of Censorship and Uniqueness Motivation on the Valuation of Sexually Explicit Messages, paper presented at the Speech Communication Association conference, Nov. 16, 1980, New York City (on file with author); R. Jones & V. Joe, Pornographic Materials and Commodity Theory, 10 J. Applied Soc. Psych. 311 (1980); S. Worchel & S. Arnold, The Effects of Censorship and Attractiveness of the Censor on Attitude Change, 9 J. Experimental Soc. Psych. 365 (1973): D. Zellinger, H. Fromkin, D. Speller, & C. Kohn, A Commodity Theory Analysis of the Effects of Age Restrictions Upon Pornographic Materials, 60 J. Applied Psych. 94 (1975).

[29]Herman & Leyens, supra note 25.

[30]Id. at 53.

[31]The implications of these two theories are clearly not restricted to only movie ratings. Reactance and commodity theory might, for instance, offer an appropriate and useful theoretical lens through which to focus on behavior (and policy) related to use of marijuana and other controlled substances.

[32]Opinion Research Corporation, An Appraisal of the Motion Picture Industry's Voluntary Rating System, July-August 1977, Princeton, N.J. (on file with author). This report found that 97% of the "total movie-going public, age 12 and over" was aware of the system.

[33]The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 40 (1970) [hereinafter cited as Commission on Obscenity and Pornography].

[34]P. Robertus & R. Simon, The Movie Code: A View from Parents and Teenagers, 47 Journalism Q. 568 (1970) [hereinafter cited as Robertus & Simon].

[35]B. Austin, M.P.A.A. Film Rating Influence on Stated Likelihood of High School Student Film Attendance: A Test of Reactance Theory (May 1981) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation in Temple University Library) [hereinafter cited as Austin, MPAA].

[36]Heffner, supra note 12, at 39.

[37]Quoted in J. Friedman, The Motion Picture Rating System of 1968: A Constitutional Analysis of Self-Regulation by the Film Industry, 73 Colum. L. Rev. 196 (1973).

[38]M. Child, "PG" and "R" Misunderstandings, Variety, Nov. 12, 1980, at 6, col. 2.

[39]C. Spainhour, letter to the editor, Boxoffice, Dec. 1980, at 4.

[40]Quoted in J. Garner, Ratings: Do They Tell Moviegoers as Much as They Should?, Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, N.Y.), Sept. 14, 1980, sec. C., at 1, col. 1.

[41]Quoted in M. Ronan, Increasing Unhappiness with Movie Ratings, Senior Scholastic, Nov. 29, 1979, at 13.

[42]The Family Movie Could be an Energy Saver, in Mass Media Issues: Articles and Commentaries 307 (L. Sellers & W. Rivers eds., 1977).

[43]R. Brandsdorfer & A. Walker, Yes, But Can I Take My Kids: The Vagueness and Vagaries of the Movie Rating Systems (sic), Comment on the Media, Spring 1980, at 29.

[44]Rating The Rating System, Time, May 31, 1977, at 72.

[45]V. Canby, The Ratings are Wrong, N.Y. Times, June 4, 1972, sec. 2 (Arts and Leisure), at 1, col. 6.

[46]Heffner, supra note 12, at 40. Further, MPAA President Valenti once admitted, "Where I think we have failed is in being able to communicate what GP [now PG] means" (Rating the Rating System, Time, May 31, 1977, at 73). See also Catholics Think Translation of Valenti Code PG Rating: "Liberty Spelled with an F---," Variety, Jan. 26, 1977, at 6, col. 1.

[47]Poll Okay for MPAA Ratings, Variety, Oct. 22, 1980, at 5, col. 1. Results of the ORC surveys for the MPAA from 1969 through 1974 are presented in J. Valenti, Rating the Movies, 26 J. Com. 62 (1976).

[48]Robertus & Simon, supra note 34, at 569.

[49]Los Angeles Times, A Look at Southern California Movie-Going 44 (1972) (on file with author) [hereinafter cited as L.A. Times].

[50]S. Yeager, G-GP-R-X: A Q-Study of the Movie Industry's Latest Attempt at Self-Regulation (1971) (unpublished M.A. thesis in University of Missouri Library) [hereinafter cited as Yeager].

[51]Cited in C. Aaronson, Majority of Students Approve Film

Ratings, Boxoffice, June 18, 1973, at 7.

[52]J. Respress, The New Motion Picture Rating Code and Its Effects on Teenage Audiences (1973) (unpublished M.A. thesis in Michigan State University Library) [hereinafter cited as Respress].

[53]S. O'Dell, A Study of Parents Attitudes Towards the Motion Picture Association of America Rating System (1973) (unpublished M.S. thesis in Oklahoma State University Library) [hereinafter cited as O'Dell].

[54]B. Austin, The Meaning Movie Ratings Have for People, study in progress.

[55]Yeager, supra note 50; O'Dell, supra note 53.

[56]For a review and discussion of such assertions see: B. Austin, The Influence of the MPAA's Film-Rating System on Motion Picture Attendance: A Pilot Study, 106 J. Psych. 91 (1980) [hereinafter cited as Austin, 1980]: B. Austin and T. Simonet, Ratings and Revenues, paper presented at the University Film Association Conference, Aug. 13, 1979, Ithaca, N.Y. (on file with author); B. Austin, M. Nicolich, & T. Simonet, Movie Ratings and Revenues: Eleven Years of Success Ratios, paper presented at the University Film Association Conference, Aug. 1980, Austin, Texas (on file with author and also available in ERIC ED 191 102) [hereinafter cited as Austin et al.].

[57]Letter form Michael Linden (MPAA Director of Research) to Bruce A. Austin (April 24, 1978).

[58]Subcommittee, supra note 14, at 54.

[59]J. Valenti, Remarks by Jack Valenti to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Theater (sic) Owners, Oct. 26, 1977, Miami Beach, Fla. (on file with author).

[60]D. Fuchs & J. Lyle, Mass Media Portrayal -- Sex and Violence, in Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research 253 (F. Kline and P. Tichenor eds., 1972) [hereinafter cited as Fuchs & Lyle].

[61]This discussion is presented in B. Austin, Movie Ratings and Their Effect on Movie Attendance, paper accepted for presentation at the Speech Communication Association Conference, Nov. 1981, Anaheim, Cal. (on file with author) [hereinafter cited as Austin, 1981].

[62]G. Jeffries (The Problem with G, American Film, June 1978, at 51) asserts that since so many producers believe the G rating to be "box office poison" they "try to ensure a PG or R rating by the gratuitous addition of 'strong' language or nudity or violence." Jennings Lang, producer of Universal's Little Miss Marker, states that "'G' can be a problem. Kids are attracted to a 'PG' because they think something exciting is happening." Lang notes that for his film to qualify for a PG he included some "strong language" (Modern Kids Shy from G: "Marker" Happy with PG, Variety, April 9, 1980, at 7, col. 3). David Friedman, Chairman of the Adult Film Association of America writes, "I think most people in the [film] industry agree that the G-rating, with the exception of Disney films, is a detriment. Major studios today seem to try for the PG rating on most of their pictures"

(letter from David Friedman to Bruce A. Austin, Dec. 3, 1979) [hereinafter cited as Friedman]. Despite such remarks as these, a few producers are convinced that, with proper marketing, G-rated films can be profitable (see G for Gold, Time, Jan. 3, 1977, at 74).

[63]Fearing that an X rating "would have meant a financial kiss of death," director Brian DePalma resubmitted his recent film, Dressed to Kill, three times before it qualified for an R (see Wood, supra note 18). Sidney Ginsberg, executive vice president of Health & Entertainment Distributing Corp., writes that "The 'X' Rating stigma was for me the 'Kiss of Death'; it prevented me from functioning in the market place and stopped me many times from getting my ads placed in newspapers" (S. Ginsberg, Kids and X Tag are Both Outdated, letter to the editor, Variety, Oct. 1, 1980, at 4, col. 4). Conversely, Friedman (supra note 62) writes that the Adult Film Association of America is "a unique specialized segment of the motion picture industry; an X-rating prominently displayed in advertising for our pictures is our only big selling point." Currently some distributors are using the strategy of simply not submitting certain pictures of theirs for a rating and releasing these films, which they anticipated would have been X-rated, with various "warning tags" (e.g., "adults only" or "This picture contains scenes of a violent nature"). See "Mother's Day" Ducks X Tag from MPAA, Variety, Sept. 24, 1980, at 5, col. 4, and Analysis Self-Xs

Pic; Ducks MPAA, Variety, Aug. 13, 1980, at 4, col. 5 for further information on "ducking the MPAA." For additional discussion of producers' and distributors' concerns regarding the X rating see "Timing" Producer has a Vex with "X" Rating, Ad Censorship, Variety, Oct. 29, 1980, at 5, col. 1 and C. Champlin, Fifty Years of the Production Code: What Will H. Hays Begat, American Film, Oct. 1980, at 42.

[64]K. Davidson testimony, Subcommittee, supra note 14, at 56.

[65]Id.

[66]Id. at 58.

[67]B. Austin, Rating the Movies, 7 J. Popular Film & Television 384 (1980) [hereinafter cited as Austin, Rating the Movies].

[68]B. Austin, Psychological Reactance as a Causative Factor in Film Attendance, paper presented at the Popular Culture Association Conference, April 1979, Pittsburgh, Pa. (on file with author).

[69]Austin, Rating the Movies, supra note 67, at 396.

[70]Austin et al., supra note 56.

[71]Analyses were also performed using "success" cut-off levels of $5, 10, 15, and 20 million (1969 dollars). No meaningful differences in results were found with these success levels as compared to the $1 million level.

[72]Individual films on this "successful" adjusted-million-dollar list were not necessarily profitable. For example, a 1969 film with a negative cost of $1.5 million, approximately the average budget of feature films that year (based on industry

estimates reported in R. Gertner, Motion Picture Almanac 1980, 36A [1980]) probably would not show a profit with only $1 million in domestic rentals. To earn the double or triple returns commonly accepted as the profit point in the industry would require about $1.5 million in domestic rentals, plus the same amount in foreign rentals, plus television and nontheatrical sales. Nevertheless, as a group, the films were "successful." They were the top 20 percent of revenue-earners. They represented the rule-of-thumb two films in 10 acknowledged to be profitable in the industry. Almost exactly that proportion (19.5%) of all films rated during the eleven years studied qualified for the "success" standard of this study. The "successful" film of this study was the one film of every five rated that qualified to be identified as a top-grosser in Variety (after Variety's qualifying standard was adjusted for inflation).

[73]L.A. Times, supra note 49, at 44.

[74]Id.

[75]Respress, supra note 52, at 196.

[76]Id., at 191.

[77]D. Campbell & J. Stanley, Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research 5 (1963) state that "Internal validity is the basic minimum without which any experiment is interpretable: Did in fact the experimental treatments make a difference in this specific experimental instance?" [hereinafter cited as Campbell & Stanley].

[78]Austin, 1980, supra note 56; Austin, MPAA, supra note 35;

Austin, 1981, supra note 61.

[79]Austin, 1980, supra note 56.

[80]Austin, 1981, supra note 61.

[81]Austin, MPAA, supra note 35.

[82]Austin, MPAA, supra note 35; Austin, 1981, supra note 61.

[83]Austin, 1981, supra note 61.

[84]Moreover, when asked if they had ever attended an R- and an X-rated movie it was found that significantly ($p<.05$) more of the respondents 17 years and older had attended such films than respondents under 17 years.

[85]Austin, MPAA, supra note 35.

[86]Austin, 1980, supra note 56.

[87]Austin, MPAA, supra note 35.

[88]All percentages reported here refer to simple raw totals of either titles checked or reported by the respondents. As in the pilot study, the "rating popularity poll" method was also computed. Although percentages for attendance by rating symbol differ between raw totals and "total mentions," analysis of age group differences were nonsignificant ($p>.05$).

[89]The L.A. Times study (supra note 49, at 29) also reported a similar finding: 46% of its sample saw a GP- or PG-rated and 40% saw an R-rated movie the last time they attended.

[90]Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, supra note 33, at 41.

[91]WBBM in Live-Lens Survey; 75% of Kids Testing Chicago Theatres Admitted to "R" Pics, Variety, May 9, 1979, at 31, col.5

[hereinafter cited as WBBM].

[92]J. Elias, Exposure of Adolescents to Erotic Materials, Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, vol. 9 at 273 (1970).

[93]WBBM, supra note 91, Fuchs & Lyle, supra note 60, at 253 state: "Informal observations of movie theaters' attendance restrictions for 'R' films at least indicate that any child of any age can and does attend when he wants." CARA Chairman Heffner has responded to the WBBM report (supra note 91) saying that their findings were a "reflection of the community" in which the investigative report was conducted and that these findings were probably not typical of all communities (telephone interview with Richard D. Heffner by Bruce A. Austin, Jan. 15, 1980).

[94]W. Tusher, Exhibs, Prods. Agree to Test a New Rating, Variety, Oct. 29, 1980, at 1, col. 5. For additional commentary on revising the rating system see: J. Brackman, The Ratings, in Film 71-72, 265 (D. Denby ed., 1972); M. Ronan, Increasing Unhappiness with Movie Ratings, Senior Scholastic, Nov. 29, 1979, at 13; D. Pollock, Movie Ratings: Time for a Change?, Los Angeles Times, May 6, 1980, part VI, at 1, col. 1.; Shapiro on Indies' Discontented Move to Fresh Rating System: "A" is for Adult, But not Porn, Variety, Sept. 24, 1980, at 5, col. 5; Non-Sexy Horror Needs Non-X Ratings; So Argues Romero, Variety, April 18, 1979, at 37, col. 1.

[95]For a discussion of "self-enforcement" see R. Randall, Classification by the Motion Picture Industry, Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, vol. 5 at 219 (1970).

[96]Aide-Memoire: On the Work of the British Board of Film Censors (no date) at 3 (on file with author). See also James Ferman (Secretary for the British Board of Film Censors), Film Censorship Today, lecture given at the 1979 All-Industry Seminar, sponsored by the Association of Independent Cinemas (on file with author).

[97]Self Control Used by Germans, Who Rate Films by Age, Variety, Feb. 25, 1981, at 43, col. 3.

[98]Campbell & Stanley, supra note 77, at 5 state that "External validity asks the question of generalizability: To what populations, settings, treatment variables, and measurement variables can this effect be generalized?" (emphasis in original).

[99]A summary of such commentary is presented in A. Wurtzel & S. Surlin, Viewer Attitudes Toward Television Advisory Warnings, 22 J. Broadcasting 19 (1978).

[100]See id.